

## **CONSUMERS IN RELATION TO THE FTAA In Search of Participation**

Consumers want to be part of the integration processes. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to find suitable mechanisms for incorporating our rights and concerns in the formal instruments agreed on by the governments in each of the plans, whether (sub)regional or multilateral.

To that effect the Oficina Regional para Latin America (ROLAC) [Regional Office for Latin America] of Consumers International (see Attachment) greatly appreciates the “Public Invitation to the Civil Society of the Participating Countries in the FTAA,” held at the end of 1998 by the Ministers Responsible for trade in the hemisphere, in accordance with what was agreed to in the Ministerial Declaration of San Jose.

The following notes are a response to that invitation and cover the process of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) from the perspective of consumers in the region, seeking to identify the main issues that the negotiations raise for us. Based on them, we shall set forth some ideas that we shall group into two sections, one general and the other specific. These ideas, given their preliminary nature, shall be amplified and elaborated on by the member organizations of ROLAC in the next Regional Conference to be held in Panama in the middle of October of this year.

### **1. GENERAL QUESTIONS**

In the last few years we have witnessed a rebirth of integration processes which are limited mainly to free trade zones, concerned almost exclusively with offering all types of facilities and guarantees to investors, as well as promoting their rights to free mobility and national treatment. In these types of agreements or treaties, consumers are conspicuously absent, seem to have no rights and only appear remotely when the possible benefits of economic liberalization are pointed out. However, these agreements did not even bring about the benefits and development that they promised. We would like for the FTAA to be different from all of the past experiences or the ones that currently exist. The FTAA’s invitation to civil society to participate in its integration process and, paradoxically, the serious world financial crisis offer an opportunity in that regard.

With the crisis, the negative consequences of the absolute nature of the market and the offer come into view. Given the imposition of reality, it does not suffice to acknowledge insufficiencies and errors of policy, rather it is also necessary to amend them. In the near future, one of the priority issues that should concern the FTAA's negotiation process is the reestablishment of political control over the market and the economy, but not of any politics, but rather of one whose focus is on satisfaction of the basic needs of consumers and of humanity. That implies rethinking not only Government, but also, and in particular, civil society and consumers. Should that not be done, the fundamentalism that is closed to the verdicts of reality and the protectionism resulting from the crisis may endanger everything achieved until now with the FTAA. Below we shall elaborate on these issues in somewhat more depth.